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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses Martin University, the only predominantly African-American school of higher learning in Indiana. Its philosophy is that higher education needs to be made available to all who can benefit. Martin University consciously exists to assist adult-aged individuals and the whole community to become free of everything that holds the people back from higher education, career achievement, personal satisfaction, and the passionate joy of life lived to the fullest. Martin University, through its "healing" and "freedom" mission, helps adult students abrogate their negative self-imposed doubts by having the freedom to integrate their life experience and knowledge within the classroom. Instructors serve as facilitators of learning, using the andragogical approach developed by the educational theorist Malcolm Knowles. In a random survey of approximately 60 Martin University students, over 90% reported their great satisfaction with Martin University as a place of learning. (BT)

The Impact of Age-Discrimination on Older People of Color Who Wish to Teach

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The Impact of Age-Discrimination on Older People of Color Who Wish to Teach

The term “adult student” is used somewhat freely in the field of education. Generally, it is intended to encompass all learners enrolled in postsecondary institutions who fall outside the 18-21 year-old age range. Of necessity, then, this study cohort includes any Martin University student whose age exceeds the high end of these parameters.

The Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac Issue (1996) survey indicated that in the fall of 1993, 58% of all (full and part-time) college and university students were 22 or older. At community colleges this cohort was 40.6% of full-time enrollment, while at comprehensive colleges this figure was 30.9%. Alone, this data may elicit a raised eyebrow but does not tell us much more than most educators already know: adults are a growing segment of the campus population.

Martin University is the only predominantly African-American school of higher learning in Indiana. Its student body is approximately 94% Black, and its faculty and staff is approximately 50/50 of African descent and other ethnicities. Located in the inner city of Indianapolis, in the blighted section known as Brightwood-Martindale, the University is totally identified with the community it serves: low-income, minority families, and primarily adult-aged persons. The typical Martin student is a Black 38-year-old single mom (or grandmother) with two or three children, a first-generation collegian, a bravely struggling member of the “working poor” who may hold down as many as two jobs, none of which remunerates her adequately, pays for health insurance, promises a career, or looks forward either to retirement or comfort in the future.

The philosophy of Martin University is that higher education needs to be made available to all who can benefit. The University focuses its service on low-income, minority, and adult-aged persons in a healing and freedom-minded environment. Martin holds firm to its mission statement because so many students and graduates of the University strongly affirm the “healing” (of many kinds) that they received while at the University.

This healing comes as part of their studies because Martin University consciously exists to assist “adult aged” individuals and the whole community—once enslaved; subsequently shackled by segregation and racism; and still hampered by classism, epidemic ill health, economic poverty, and other forms of oppression—to become free of everything that holds the people back from higher education, career achievement, personal satisfaction, and the passionate joy of life lived to the fullest.

Timothy Quinman in his book “Adult Students “At-Risk”, reveals that for higher educators another version of “at-risk” emerges in the plight of the returning adult student, who is also greeted by lower academic expectations and fewer institutional resources. In some instances it may be the woman who puts off seeking a degree for marriage, to have

children, to raise a family and now, facing a midlife divorce and the exigency of supporting herself, decides to chart a new life course. Just as easily, it may be the mid-career male ousted during the last round of corporate restructuring who, in order to be competitive in a highly technical job market, urgently needs to update his skills and knowledge base (Simmons, 1995).

The binding thread between the two, one might argue, lies in the fact that both the K-12 “at-risk” case and adult students are poorly equipped to perform up to academic standards. The primary difference is where the doubts about success originate: adult students are hampered by self-imposed doubts (Apps, 1981) while pre-college students may more often be hindered by external forces outside their making or control. As for the adult student, Martin University, through its “healing” and “freedom” mission, helps students abrogate their negative self-imposed doubts by having the freedom to integrate their life experiences and knowledge within the classroom. Adult-aged students bring a wealth of knowledge to the classroom; therefore Martin University does not use the title “Professors” but “Instructors” for we serve as facilitators of learning.

This andragogical approach, developed by the educational theorist Malcolm Knowles, translates into student-centered programs and individually planned degrees. Knowles’s theory of andragogy emphasizes that adults are self-directed learners and expect to take responsibility for decisions. Andragogy implies the following about the design of learning: (1) Adults need to know the purpose for learning, (2) adults need to learn experientially, (3) adults approach learning as problem-solving, and (4) adults learn best when the topic is relevant. Adult students need the freedom to be a part of the learning process; they need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction. They are most interested in learning that has relevance to their professional and personal lives.

In a random survey of approximately 60 Martin University students, over 90% of the students surveyed using a likard scale questionnaire battery (1=Strongly Agree and 10 = Strongly Disagree) reported the following:

- 98% - Strongly agreed that their attendance at another college and/or university proved that non-traditional adult-aged students were less favored compared to traditional students.
- 100% - Strongly agreed that traditional colleges and universities consciously create an atmosphere that caters mainly to traditional students.
- 98% - Strongly agreed that Martin University has helped them better understand their potential and abilities for college success.
- 93% - Strongly agreed that if they were attending a traditional college and/or university, their chances of graduating would be below 50%.

- 98% - Strongly disagreed to not having experienced any “healing” within their lives while attending Martin University.
- 100% - Strongly disagreed that Martin University’s andragogy style of teaching proved no advantage in the teaching and learning of adult-aged students.
- 96% - Strongly disagreed that while attending Martin University they have not experience a sense of purpose within their educational pursuit compared to their experiences at other institutions.

Lest the listener be uncertain, this research paper is predicated on the “*pretense*” of adult education as it has been and is formally practiced in American colleges. In addition, how Martin University counters America’s traditional student oriented institutions through “healing”, “freedom”, and the andragogical style of teaching and learning that benefits the adult-aged student. The cognitive phenomena of “adult” learning are matters left to psychologists. The focus here is on the structures, concepts, and techniques predominating in organized academic systems. Further, if sociocultural factors help determine whether adults are going to succeed in institutions, it is important to differentiate between education and learning, as the two vary widely.

Exacerbating an already strained relationship are the preconceptions faculty and administrators bring to discussions on how best to serve mature learners. Paradoxically, these notions work to undercut adult student pleas for change, landing on closed ears and minds. Interestingly, this ethos is grounded as much in capitalistic archetypes (Agger, 1989) as it is ingrained in the culture of the organization. For it is widely held, erroneous or not, that in Western societies there is presupposed order of things. Such ordered systems are especially pronounced and inflexible when applied to economic matters. Children play, adolescents attend school, adults labor, and retired persons live off pensions and social security entitlements. Simple and unswerving is our social obedience to this canon.

In closing, the afore mentioned Malcolm Knowles, a luminary in the field of adult learning, speaks to the problem this rationale introduces:

In the prevailing view of society, it is the major task of children to go to school, study and learn, the major task of the adult to get a job and work. In brief, childhood and youth are a time for learning and adulthood a time for working. This is beginning to change, but the dominant thrust of society’s expectation and equally of his self-expectation is that for an adult, the learning role is not a major element I his repertoire of living. Thus both society and the adult view himself as a non-learner.



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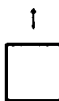
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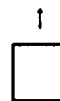
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